Chapter 1

When David Beats Goliath

Why Product Marketing Matters

Marco Arment had the Silicon Valley "It" factor. A prolific developer, he was the lead engineer and chief technology officer of Tumblr, a microblogging website that was sold to Yahoo for over $1 billion in cash. His blog was viewed more than 500,000 times a month, and he had a popular podcast before podcasts were a thing.

It's no wonder tech press were captivated by Instapaper, Marco's next creation after Tumblr. They talked about the app for saving web pages to read later as if it was the only one that did the job.

But around that same time, Nate Weiner, a self-taught code slinger from the Midwest, had seen the same problem. People saw articles in their social feeds or web pages and wanted to save and view them later. He created Read It Later to do just that.

With a dash of visual design from his girlfriend and some coding help from his twin, in just a couple of years, Read It Later was used by 3.5 million people—nearly triple the users of Instapaper—and had hundreds of rave reviews. Yet press talking about great productivity apps still only mentioned Instapaper.

Apple announced a feature called "Reading List" at its World Wide Developer Conference. It validated Nate's app but also prompted a brief Twitter storm, with some declaring game over for Read It Later.

Instapaper stayed its course, occasionally adding new features. Three years after he created it, Marco sold Instapaper to Betaworks. Growth languished. Eventually, what remained of the company bounced around in a game of musical owners.

In that same period of time, Read It Later rebranded as Pocket, won nearly every major app award, integrated into hundreds of apps, got multiple rounds of venture capital, and nailed every external marker of success. By the time Pocket was acquired by Mozilla, the makers of the Firefox browser, it had 20 million users.

How did Nate and his small team beat the Goliath reputation of Marco and Instapaper to win their category?

Despite none of them having the title "product marketer," they collectively worked to shift focus from just building the product to a "product marketing" mindset.

This is just some of what they did:

Sharing data around shifting trends in consumer behavior. From company blog posts with surprising factoids—for instance, of the thousand most saved videos, the median length was 30 minutes—to showing the press the rapid growth in saving items as mobile device use exploded, the team promoted a customer and market-centered point of view, not just one about their product.

Connecting their product's purpose with broader trends. They started comparing what they did for web pages to similar shifts. Like how Dropbox changed file sharing or Netflix changed TV. They connected themselves to a much bigger "anytime, anywhere" megatrend, saying "we're the ones who are doing this for Internet content." They also developed an API that let any app integrate their "save-for-later" functionality, making it an industry standard.

Rebranding from Read It Later to Pocket. This was a strategic decision designed to help the world see Pocket as bigger than saving articles for later. Changing the product name when they released their 4.0 version was important to show some of their key differentiators—like the ability to save videos and images—and define what was important for products like theirs.

Making it free instead of $3.99. It's hard to ask people to pay for something when they haven't yet experienced its value. The change was messaged in an authentic blog from its founder, where he also explained they were now a venture-backed startup. It helped cement the trusted relationship Nate had with Pocket's users despite big changes.

Sharing the "why" and advance access with influencers. Before launching any new version, they made sure to give the most influential evangelists—press, pundits, superfans—the "why" behind the new enhancements, giving new features more meaning.

Like many who build products, Nate's initial instinct to beat Instapaper was to add more features and be the better product. While product enhancements were critically important (they did a major redesign along with the rebrand), without a market context that gave them meaning, it would have just been more feature noise in a world already drowning in apps. The natural inertia behind Instapaper would have kept it the industry's darling.

Pocket's story is like many others in tech. Competitors are bigger or better known. The product team is concerned the world hasn't heard of them nor do prospective customers understand what they've built or why it matters. The impulse is to build more product to show why it's better. And while you have to build good product, market traction—how every product's success is ultimately measured—requires equal, concerted effort on the market side. Specifically, who's the right market, the best ways to reach them, and who needs to say or do what for your product to be credible.

This is the job of product marketing.

What Is Product Marketing?

Product marketing's purpose is to drive product adoption by shaping market perception through strategic marketing activities that meet business goals.

The work is not optional. As the Pocket team discovered, if you don't position your product and act with clear purpose, competitors and market dynamics actively work against you.

Product marketing brings strategic intent and product insight to all market-facing activities. It coordinates a winning plan across the entire go-to-market engine (marketing and sales) and provides the foundational work for everything those teams need to succeed. It's necessary work for everything from hitting user goals to leading a category. If you look at the list of what Pocket did, everything framed why Pocket had value even when they weren't talking about their product.

The job also includes working with product teams to make better decisions affecting market adoption. This can range from prioritizing a feature to writing a piece of content that reframes a competitor. When Pocket wrote blogs about top saved videos, it highlighted saving videos—a feature Instapaper didn't have—and established what good products in the category do without talking about their product at all.

The work is both highly strategic and tactical. But it is far more than creating product collateral, doing sales enablement, or managing launches, a common misperception of the role. Unfortunately, for too many, this collection of tasks has become the role. These tasks are a function of the job being done; they don't define its purpose.

My hope in writing this book is to refocus product marketing around its purpose—leveraging product investments in a deliberate way so the go-to-market machinery can achieve a business's goals.

That requires clarifying what it means to do the job *well*.

It starts with the foundation of product marketing, which comes down to just four fundamentals from which all important work flows. They are:

Fundamental 1: Ambassador: Connect Customer and Market Insights
Fundamental 2: Strategist: Direct Your Product's Go-to-Market
Fundamental 3: Storyteller: Shape How the World Thinks About Your Product
Fundamental 4: Evangelist: Enable Others to Tell the Story

The rest of part 1 of this book explains these fundamentals in depth and how to do them better.

Why Product Marketing Matters Now

I'm intentionally using the function **product marketing** and not the role **product marketer** as I describe all this. As Nate and the team at Pocket showed, good product marketing can happen if capable individuals are willing to do the work. Nate and his team were exceptional at learning, and their willingness to apply product marketing fundamentals was outstanding.

Not every company has people willing or capable of doing this, but it does mean you can get product marketing done without the perfect team formation yet in place. This doesn't mean you shouldn't staff the role. Outcomes always improve with strong product marketers. It just removes excuses for not doing the work with who you have now.

Because the need for good product marketing has never been more urgent or important.

Modern development tools (open source, cloud everything) and methods mean every product landscape isn't just increasing. It's increasing at an increasing rate. For example, the marketing technology category had 150 companies in its first year and over 8,000 battling it out nine years later. The Apple App Store opened with 500 apps and now has over 5 million. There's the API economy, Web 3.0, the rise of product-led growth. Search engines and tech giants are the front door to customers discovering nearly all product information. Social media doesn't just influence points of view, it contains millions of influencers—at least 100× the number of journalists in the world.

Products make identical claims and have similar features. Pricing often doesn't help frame value—similar products can have very different prices for non-obvious reasons. Trusted relationships and word of mouth are more powerful than ever in influencing decision-making—even for major enterprise software. Imagine how difficult it is for any potential customer to navigate the modern decision landscape.

There is no way for a product to stand out and win unless its entire go-to-market engine is carefully coordinated and it holds a clear market position. That's product marketing.

Where Product Marketing Fits

There is a lot of confusion about the difference between marketing—the function at large—and product marketing, the specific role often part of the marketing organization.

The customer journey is never a straight line: They experience a problem, plunge into the information landscape, and may at some point come out with a hand up to try, buy, or enter a sales process.

The art of finding and reaching that customer on their journey with the right message at the right time so they are willing to consider a product is the job of *marketing*. The art of selling and converting a prospective buyer into a customer is the job of *sales*.

Modern marketing teams are filled with specialists who amplify messages, deploy campaigns, and manage and execute programs in their respective domains: demand generation, digital/web/search, advertising, social, content, influencer, community, analyst relations, marketing operations, public relations, marketing communications, brand, and events—many residing in a corporate marketing function. The range of marketing channels is so vast, I have a dedicated appendix at the back of the book defining them. The bigger the company, the more complex and layered marketing becomes.

Marketing specialists rely on product marketers to do their jobs well. Product marketers define what aspects of a product to promote, who to target, why target customers care, and which channels are most important. They are the bridge between the product organization and ensuring the actions from the go-to-market engine of marketing and sales result in business impact.

Part 2 of this book dives into the details of how product marketing interfaces with all its partner functions—product, marketing, and sales—and the best practices that make these partnerships effective. The rest of part 1 focuses on explaining the four fundamentals in more detail.

Practicing them is what gives clarity of purpose to a product's go-to-market. That intentionality, in turn, is what separates companies that succeed wildly from those that do just well enough. It requires investing in a strong product marketing foundation, and the purpose of this book is to show you how to do it.